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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000061

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SUBJECT: CHINA: POPE'S EASTER LETTER ON HOLD?

REF: (A) VATICAN 0030 (B) VATICAN 0054

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CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher J. Sandrolini, Charge, AMEMB VATICAN, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: According to Holy See MFA Country Director for PRC Rota-Graziosi, the Vatican will not release its much-anticipated Papal letter to Chinese Catholics at Easter time, as was expected. Rota-Graziosi could not say when it would be released. The letter will purportedly address the division in the Church in China and call for increased religious freedom. In a related development, Cardinal Zen of Hong-Kong described in a media interview the Holy See and GoC's modus vivendi on some illicitly-ordained bishops. The continued blurring of the dividing line between the official and unofficial Catholic Churches in China is a positive development for Holy See-China relations. End Summary

Uncertain Release Date for Papal Letter to Chinese Faithful

¶2. (C) Ref(a) reported on the Vatican's January 2007 meeting to formulate a unified policy toward the GoC. In a statement following the meeting, the Holy See reported the Pope would address a letter to the Catholics in China in the near future. In early March, Cardinal Joseph Zen of Hong Kong said the Pope's letter to Chinese Catholics would be released at Easter time (first week of April) and would encourage the faithful, clarify issues of doctrine, and call for full religious freedom. According to Zen, who apparently had seen drafts of the Pope's letter, the letter will be delivered to the GOC several days prior to its public release.

¶3. (C) Holy See MFA Country Director for PRC Monsignor Gianfranco Rota-Graziosi told us March 16 the Pope's hectic Easter schedule would not permit the letter's release at that time. Rota-Graziosi wasn't sure when the letter would be released. Asked to comment on Zen's Easter release date forecast, Rota-Graziosi emphasized that Zen was "an individual Cardinal" who speaks for himself and not for the Holy See on such matters. [Note: Several Holy See officials have made similar remarks to us in the past about Zen.]

¶4. (C) Separately, Father Bernardo Cervellera, Director of Asia News and a recognized expert on Holy See - China relations, commented to us on March 20 that he also did not expect to see the Papal letter released during the Easter season. Cervellera said the Holy See wanted to release the letter at a time when its message would be prominent and not diminished by other

events/news. Cervellera did not believe the letter would necessarily be delayed beyond Easter and held out hope that it might even be released prior to Easter.

China Stays Church-Related Actions Awaiting Papal Letter

15. (C) Rota-Graziosi indicated that the GoC has seemingly avoided taking any action on Holy See or internal Church matters since the announcement of forthcoming Papal letter. He also mentioned the visit of a high-level Chinese delegation to the Holy See in late January. The delegation inquired about the results of Vatican meeting on China and the contents of the Papal letter. Rota-Graziosi said the GoC representatives avoided any discussion of substantive bilateral issues, instead focusing only on the potential impact of the letter's content on the GoC. Rota-Graziosi also indicated that the Holy See had expected the illicit ordination of three additional Chinese bishops in the February/March 2007 timeframe - ordinations that have apparently been held in abeyance awaiting the release of the Papal letter.

Holy See and China Tiptoeing Around Illicit Episcopal Ordinations

16. (C) In a March 7 interview with "Avvenire", the newspaper operated by the Italian Bishops' Conference, Cardinal Zen made the following points:

- For the first time, the Holy See affirmed the fact that a large majority of Chinese bishops, official and unofficial, is in communion with the Holy See. The affirmation came in the Vatican statement released after the January 19-20 China meeting. Zen said it was a sign of good will that the Patriotic Association did not deny the statement.
- The Holy See has legitimized a large number of bishops ordained without Holy See consent and has not concurrently required that they renounce their allegiance to the GoC. The GoC has reciprocated with a tolerant attitude toward these

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bishops by not conducting any reprisals against them. [Note: Other media sources and Rota-Graziosi have had similar comments.]

- There has so far been no reaction from the GoC to the announcement of the forthcoming Papal letter to Chinese Catholics. [Note: See para 5 above - according to Graziosi, the GoC has avoided taking certain actions in anticipation of the letter.]
- The 1988 directive from the Holy See's Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (the department that directs most ecclesiastical matters regarding China) requiring members of the underground Catholic community to avoid taking sacraments with members of the official church is still in force. That policy issue, however, was not addressed at the January 2007 Vatican China policy meeting.
- The official and unofficial communities co-exist peacefully in a large majority of cases.

Comment

17. (C) For all the buzz about the China letter, the Holy See does not seem to be in a great hurry to get it out. Rota-Graziosi told us that he did not anticipate any significant change from the GoC as a result of the letter, but that it made sense for the pope to attempt to speak directly to Chinese Catholics. Meanwhile, the continued blurring of the dividing line between the official and unofficial Catholic Churches can't hurt momentum for improvements in Holy See-China relations. End

Comment.
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